‘The murderous civilisation’: anarchist geographies, ethnography and cultural differences in the works of Elie Reclus

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Introduction

This article addresses a forgotten chapter in the relation between geography and culture through an analysis of the ethnographical works of Élie Reclus (1827-1904), the elder brother of the famous French geographer Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) and an important contributor to the latter’s *New Universal Geography*.[i] The Reclus brothers, as a recent body of international literature has shown, were part of an international network of anarchist militants and scholars radically committed to opposing colonialism and European empires’ colonial crimes. Together with Pyotr Kropotkin (1842-1921) and Léon Metchnikoff (also written Mečnikov or Mechnikov) (1838-1888), the Reclus brothers were known as ‘anarchist geographers’[ii] and acknowledged as pioneers by the present-day rediscovery of anarchist geographies.[iii]

Nevertheless, figures like Élie Reclus, who was somewhat overshadowed by his brother Élisée, and other early anarchists committed to ethnographic work like the French militant Mecislas Golberg (1869-1907), remain little studied. Based on primary sources and drawing on the double theoretical frame of present-day anarchist anthropologies and current literature on cultural geography, antiracist geographies and postcolonialism, the present article is a first attempt to fill this gap. It addresses Élie Reclus’s approach to the destruction of hunter-gatherers by presenting a thorough textual analysis of his works on the Arctic Inuit and the Aboriginal Australians.

Similar to what is taking place in human geography, a significant part of contemporary cultural anthropology has recently rediscovered anarchist themes, addressing societies organised without government. A classic work is *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004) by David Graeber, who argues that there is a tradition in anarchist anthropologies which affects authors like Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) and later Pierre Clastres

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(1934-1977). In his *Society Against the State* (1974), Clastres argued that some Amazonian peoples whose stateless institutions were seen as a marker of 'backwardness' were, on the contrary, aware of the need to avoid the concentration of power and to consider people who have been entrusted with public responsibilities not as privileged, but as personnel in the service of one and all. More recently, authors like Brian Morris, Harold Barclay and James C. Scott have studied first or 'indigenous' peoples through left/libertarian lenses. As for the word 'indigenous', I have adopted the definition recently given by James D. Sidaway, Chih Yuan Woon and Jane Jacobs, who stress the double meaning of the term, which primarily 'enshrines an outdated, history defining, anthropological notion of the "primitive" which may have unanticipated negative political effects for indigenous people. Others, including indigenous people themselves, counter that the concept is meaningful and, because now enshrined in certain instruments of recognition, necessary'.[iv]

The anthropologist who seems to be the closest to Clastres's approach today is James C. Scott, who is committed to deconstructing 'civilizational discourses about the "barbarian", the "rough", the "primitive". On close inspection these terms, practically, mean ungoverned, not-yet incorporated. Civilizational discourses never entrain the possibility of people voluntarily going over the barbarians, hence such statuses are stigmatized and ethnicized.'[v] Scott's works on Zomia, the huge mountain area known as the Southeast Asian mainland massif, which he views as an historical shelter for unruly people and self-governing communities seeking refuge from the despotic regimes of the plains, reinterpret parts of the Reclus brothers' and Kropotkin's discourses on mutual aid within the historical mountain communities in Europe.[vi]

In the same vein Harold Barclay, in his work *People Without Government, an Anthropology of Anarchy* (1996), traces a continuity between Kropotkin and later scholars like Mauss and Clastres in the analysis of mutualism and reciprocity in different peoples and cultures. He mentions some statements of 19th century anthropologists, not only anarchists (it is the case of Edward Burnett Taylor), such as, 'Among the lessons to be learnt from the life of rude tribes is how society can go on without the policeman to keep order'.[vii] Barclay notices elements close to the current political idea of anarchism in the social structures of hunter-gatherers, 'Then anarchy must be the

oldest and one of the most enduring kinds of polity'.[viii] Also in more complex tribes like the Santal, according to Barclay, 'village life is so structured that it prevents the concentration of power'.[ix] Nevertheless, the authors mentioned above tend to refer only to Kropotkin (better known to the Anglophone reader) as an early example of an anarchist scientific approach. One hardly finds references to the Reclus brothers with the exception of Brian Morris, who argues that Élie Reclus's 1885 monograph *Les Primitifs*, 'contains lucid and sympathetic accounts of such people as the Apaches, Naytars, Todas and Inuits. Reclus declares the moral and intellectual equality of those cultures with that of the so-called civilised states'.[x] Thus, there is a lacuna to fill in the field of early anarchist approaches to ethnography and cultural anthropology.

It is worth noting that anarchist thinkers, albeit criticising modernity, do not fetishize tribal and traditional communities, as shown by recent research on the relations between anarchism and non-European cultures and traditions. Works on postcolonial anarchism and indigenous movements like those edited by Steven Hirsch and Lucien Van Der Walt demonstrated that anarchism was the first political movement of European origin which empathised with indigenous cultures in Africa, Asia and the Americas.[xi] Nevertheless, the interaction between anarchism and these cultures rarely drew on claims for local traditions, yet it generally served to foster critical ideas of non-European modernites, as showed by Sho Konishi's research on Japan and Maia Ramnath's works on India. According to Ramnath, the history of anarchists' commitment to Indian anti-colonialism is an example of existing alternatives to decolonisation as nationalism and traditionalism.[xii] Konishi even argues that exchanges between Russian and Japanese radicals at the time of the Meiji Revolution (1868), inaugurated by the aforementioned Metchnikoff, inspired 'a transnationally formulated temporality and corresponding order of knowledge and practice that [Konishi calls] cooperatist anarchist modernity … beyond western modern constructs'.[xiii]

On the standpoint of cultural geographies, European representations of indigenous peoples are generally studied in the wider context of research on postcolonialism and otherness, a concept which Jean-François Staszak defines as the 'result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (Us, the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (Them, the Other) by

stigmatising a difference – real or imagined, presented as a negation of identity'.[xiv] If, on the one hand, 'all groups tend to value themselves and distinguish themselves from Others whom they devalue',[xv] on the other, 'geography is a remarkably effective producer of otherness'.[xvi]

Catherine Nash underscored the links between studies on otherness, racism and postcolonialism and the realm of cultural geographies within the 'crosscurrents between cultural geography, postcolonial studies and other work on cultural identities, processes, practices, politics and social divisions'.[xvii] The same author provides a definition of cultural difference as an idea 'central to postcolonial theory'.[xviii] Even in this case, geography is a strong factor in the construction of differences through 'the cultural strategies that accompanied and enabled the extension of European power, colonial cultural impacts, forms of resistance'.[xix] Addressing the issue of antiracist geographies, Nash observes that, whereas the traditional biological racialism has become widely unfashionable in the 21st century, a new kind of racism emerged under the form of cultural essentialism, fixing difference as an ineluctable political and cultural problem.

> The charge of racism has led to a shift away from explicit discourses of race to those of cultural difference. Arguments about the cultural making rather than natural status of race have been central to antiracism. Nevertheless, antiracist arguments for considering human diversity in terms of anti-essentialist cultural difference can easily be recouped to support ideas of national cultural purity, cultural exclusiveness and natural antagonism between 'cultures'. The concept of culture has a central place in new racism whose discourses have shifted from the overt claims of racial superiority and biological difference to the idea that 'fear of strangers' and tensions between groups are an innate and universal feature of human societies.[xx]

Antiracist geographies should then challenge 'both scientific racism and cultural fundamentalist ideas of natural animosity between cultural groups'.[xxi]

My main argument is that the case study that I am addressing provides useful elements for present debates, because Élie Reclus's ethnography, inserted in the wider context of anarchist geographies, provided early challenges to both biological racism and civilizational essentialism, applying both empathy towards the Other and equalitarian internationalism. His ethnographic research on the hunter-gatherers, groups considered at that time as the 'lowest stages' of

civilisation by mainstream European science, implied not only political opposition to the more striking colonial crimes, but also the attempt to forge completely different discourses on civilisation and differences by considering cultures as relative elements. This shows how science was not a uniform realm, but a battlefield for scholars committed to equality and the full inclusion of the Other. As I argued, if Élie Reclus and the other anarchist geographers were very interested in the governless institutions of the peoples they addressed and in some forms of 'primitive communism', this did not lead to an irenic idealisation of Rousseau's 'state of nature'. They were fully committed to the problems of their industrial societies and their discourse entailed a comparison between the capitalist exploitation of proletarians and the inhuman mechanisms of the destruction of extra-European peoples. Nonetheless, consistent with anarchist principles, they believed that European revolutionaries should not teach emancipation to these peoples: they were entitled to rise up and emancipate themselves, in their own ways, which explains anarchist principles of cultural relativism, mutual understanding and empathy.[xxii] It was not a negation of the Enlightenment values, but the statement that another Enlightenment from outside Europe was possible, granting justice and equality for all. An original aspect of this discourse was that it was not limited to humanitarianism, as in the case of Victorian antiracism,[xxiii] but could draw on overall revolutionary principles anticipating later geographies of solidarity and internationalism[xxiv] and dissident geographies.[xxv]

In the first part of my paper, I address the cultural context of the evolutionist anthropology which inspired the Reclus brothers as a scientific field getting rid of conservative knowledge. In the second part, I analyse Élie Reclus's studies of the Inuit and their importance for the respect of cultural differences. In the third part, I analyse his studies of Australian hunter-gatherers, also engaging with works on the European perception of Aboriginal Australians by Kay Anderson,[xxvi] Germaine Greer[xxvii] and others.

1. Struggles in evolution

The commitment of the anarchist geographers to 19th century evolutionism is impossible to understand without considering the importance of 'rational' science as a battlefield between religious traditions and liberal, secular and progressive free thinking. Recent works by James

Secord on Charles Lyell (1797-1875) are an important starting point to clarify this topic. One anecdote concerns contemporary readers of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1833): 'The atheist agitator Charles Southwell, in prison in 1842 for blasphemy, asked for a copy along with his accordion and some cigars'.[xxviii] In fact, physical sciences were questioning biblical tales like the Flood and were clearly at the centre of a fierce controversy whose stakes involved 'freeing science from Moses'.[xxix] In this context, geology was deemed 'an upstart science associated with infidelity and revolutionary atheism'.[xxx] Secord's argument is that Lyell was one of the main inspirations of the later Darwinian revolution, and that his science can be seen as the expression of an implicit political strategy by someone who was not a revolutionary, but a gentleman with important ties among the upper class. Thus, Lyell's book 'was a Trojan horse' indeed, considering that only 'a gentleman entailed could have used such an unlikely vehicle to advocate controversial views. The *Principles* had the imprint of conservative classicism, but had within a secret army of reform'.[xxxi]

Later, according to George Stocking, some British anthropologists used Darwin's ideas against the most conservative and clerical thinkers by stating the principle of the fundamental unity of the human faculties.[xxxii] This implied the inclusion of the so-called 'savages' in a common human story, challenging conservative authors like Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) who, espousing the concept of 'degenerationism', rejected the very possibility of progress and considered 'savages' as being not humans but a degenerated branch of Adam's lineage, the 'objectification of the original sin'.[xxxiii] In a clear contrast with evolutionist anthropologists, conservatives and clerics defended the 'innate' inferiority of 'primitives' in the political context of the Restoration, trying to be rid of the French Revolution. According to Ugo Fabietti, 'the savage, the Other, found a place in the history of humankind through the optimistic and progressive ideology of the Enlightenment: after the latter's decline, [the savage] was banished once again from history'.[xxxiv] Evolutionist anthropologist John Lubbock (1834-1913) then questioned 'not only the biblical tradition, but also the chronology of the world that was accepted by the Church',[xxxv] introducing the concept of prehistory. The crisis of creationism and diluvialism was accompanied by what Fabietti calls the 'Palaeolithic equation', which meant that all humankind was likely to pass through the same developmental phases in material culture (Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Ages of

Metals, etc.), and thus 'primitives' were not 'degenerated' people, but the image of early Europeans, 'due to the fundamental identity of human faculties'.[xxxvi]

Anarchist geographers like Kropotkin, Metchnikoff and the Reclus brothers were committed to the new ethnographic and anthropological sciences and also contributed to the debates surrounding the theory of evolution, furnishing a solidarity-inflected interpretation of the principle of natural selection based not on competition but on cooperation through the theory of mutual aid seen in a Darwinian cultural context[xxxvii] and popularised by Kropotkin's book of the same name.[xxxviii] Élie Reclus lived for some years in London in the 1870s, where he was President of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland,[xxxix] and a friend of Lubbock, whom he thought of as his mentor for 'entering this scientific field'.[xl] Nevertheless, the Recluses diverged from Lubbock and Tylor because the anarchists went several steps further in stating the principles of equality and empathy, i.e. the effort toward understanding, and not stigmatising, cultural differences.[xli] Victorian anthropologists did not renounce a racial hierarchy the top level of which was occupied by White Europeans. According to Lubbock, 'The weapons and implements now used by the lower races of men throw much light on the signification and use of those discovered in ancient tumuli',[xlii] while Tylor asserted that his scientific interests were 'the lowest known stages of civilisation and the lower races'.[xliii] On the other hand, the anarchist geographers explicitly denied the existence of inferior or superior races. Élisée Reclus stated that it was time for 'getting rid of this idea',[xliv] while Metchnikoff observed that 'no anthropologist has yet defined what precisely a human race is'.[xlv]

From a cultural standpoint, Élie Reclus acknowledged the presence in all peoples of the 'moral individual' [*homme moral*],[xlvi] which corresponds to Carl Ritter's definition of *sittliche Mensch*, the active subject of scientific knowledge. This has huge epistemological implications, because it means that the Other, the subaltern, who according to the dominant classes is only the passive object of knowledge and 'cannot speak',[xlvii] is considered the legitimate subject for all his/her own knowledge. In the introduction of his book *Les Primitifs* (1885), Élie Reclus started with a critique of the anthropological sources. 'In several so-called savage tribes, the average individual is not morally, nor intellectually, inferior to the individual of our so-called civilised states... These

peoples were described only by their invaders, those able to understand them the least'.[xlviii] The use of the definition 'so-called' corroborated the relativist questioning of ethnocentrism by Élisée Reclus, who argued that 'the smallest human group in the state of nature considers itself the centre of universe and the most perfect representative of humankind',[xlix] and that he would talk about Europe 'avoiding similar prejudices'.[l]

2 The Inuit: between hunter-gatherers and murderers-civilisers

Contemporary studies of Inuit geographies address their vernacular knowledge of territories, stressing the different cultural lenses through which different peoples express their relation to the earth and its representations.[li] Élie Reclus devoted two case studies to the Inuit, the 'Eastern' ones settled on Baffin Island, and the 'Western' ones in the Aleut Islands; his study is presented as a sample, inviting readers to avoid essentialising very different tribes in a single definition. Brian Morris (2015) considers Reclus's use of the term Inuit more frequently than Eskimo to be very advanced, an empathic choice, even though Reclus employed both definitions, anyway after warning against prejudices and racism.

> Many people consider the Inuit people the most backward and unpolished of our species. This definition was used for so many peoples, tribes and nations that it ceased to have the slightest importance; it is a simple way to say that these peoples are little known. Every explorer defines the savages that he observes as ignorant and brutes. Considering himself the measure of humankind, he uses the strongest expressions to allege his superiority.[lii]

A link between geography and ethnography can be seen in the attempt to understand every people in their environmental context. This does not imply the affirmation of any physical determinism since it was intended as a tool to make sense of differences, considering the Inuit 'in large measure the product of their climate, because environment implies adapted food, shelter and dress'.[liii] These statements are akin to contemporary studies by Metchnikoff, who wrote about the hunter-gatherers of Southwest Africa, trying to counter the then current contemptuous prejudices about the Kalahari Sans. He argued that the sources provided by explorers and missionaries were too limited, and the only clear issue was that the intelligence of these peoples 'is deployed in a too different context, thus it is almost impossible for us to fully understand it'.[liv]

In Élie Reclus's work, relativist metaphors comparing the alleged 'savageness' of native peoples to the brutality of capitalist exploitation in European societies are frequent. Describing the dogs pulling Inuit's sleds, Reclus compares their condition of slaves to that of all the subalterns who attack their peers instead of revolting against their masters. 'When this slave dog receives a lash, because it cannot turn around to bite, it takes its revenge by biting its closest companion; suddenly, every dog has been bitten, and the sled glides over the snow amidst growls, protestations and howling: what more human! How else do you think the machinery of the State moves forward?'[lv] About the infanticide (true or alleged) practiced among the Eastern Inuit and described in indignant tones by explorers, Reclus recalls ironically that once 'in German countries, people threw orphans in the same grave as their father, if poor…: civilisation increases with food and food with civilisation'.[lvi] The same sarcasm levelled at capitalism is deployed against the alleged practices of euthanasia for sick people with the clear aim of suggesting to the readers that the Other, in this case the Siberian Chukchi, were closer to Us than was believed. 'Corpses are eaten by dogs, which will also be eaten. These Chukchi are decidedly more talented that our liberal economists of the Manchester school'.[lvii]

Reclus's chapters on the 'Western Inuit', or Aleuts, show his awareness of the concurrency of multiple powers in imperial exploitation. The author compares American imperialism and the Russian form in terms of how they played out against the inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands. 'Russian civilisation dealt them a terrible blow; American civilisation will end up killing them'.[lviii] One of the tools of extermination was the importation of European vices like alcohol, which was also decried by Élisée Reclus, who argued that North American colonists voluntarily distributed whisky and spread diseases to kill Indian tribes.[lix] According to Élie Reclus, the Aleuts 'enthusiastically accepted hard liquor, the first gift civilisation makes to barbarians'.[lx]

Studying so-called primitive tribes, the Reclus brothers also expressed their feminist sensibility, akin to the first women's associations in France.[lxi] Chris Knight has argued that the anthropology of the first half of the 20th century abandoned the former ethnographic ideas of matrilineal kinship, due to the reaction Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) had to an idea formulated by Lewis Morgan (1818-1881), that matrilineal kinship was the first and easier way to recognise

social relations in nomadic societies where the concept of nuclear family did not exist. According to Knight, applying the European model of family to ancient or 'primitive' societies was a reaction to models that were considered too communist and collectivist, since they were also accepted by Friedrich Engels. Knight argues that it was only in the 1970s that 'hunter-gatherer ethnographers effectively demolished the patrilocal band model'.[lxii] It is not surprising then that Élie Reclus was allied with the supporters of the 'matrilineal clan' Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887) and John McLennan (1827-1881),[lxiii] whose theories backed Élie's political statements on women's role in society. Asserting that women's activity was at the root of society as its first educational agency, Reclus concluded, through observing 'primitive' societies, that 'woman was the first architect'[lxiv] and that 'in spite of current doctrines, we consider woman to be the creator of the primordial elements of civilisation'.[lxv] And referring to indignant missionaries' comments on some Aleut women's polyandry, Reclus took the opportunity for another provocative comparison with European habits and customs. 'Hyperboreans do not find it surprising if, for an Aleut woman, one husband is not sufficient. Indeed, in bygone times, upper-class Florentine ladies had nuptial contracts which recognised their right to choose an additional lover'.[lxvi]

Another important issue for Reclus's political agenda was the existence among these peoples of mutual aid and 'primitive communism', which anticipated some features of the present-day research agenda by the aforementioned Scott, Barclay and Morris. Stressing that the Inuit lived the principles of mutual aid among themselves, Reclus asserts that the pre-eminence of cooperation over individualism was due primarily to environmental conditions. 'While the Eskimo tribes were not grand families, with a sense of solidarity uniting them, if they did not apply deep communist principles, their small republics would be fated to die. Indeed they do not yet understand the famous principle 'every man for himself', nor the eternal truth of Supply and Demand. They do not listen to the sirens of Rent and Capital'.[lxvii]

Reclus insisted on the relativistic idea that these peoples, deemed barbarous by European explorers, could consider so-called civilised societies barbarous as well. 'The theory of Rent, which dominates our Western civilisation, Capital growing and multiplying thanks to others' work… what a monstrosity for these good-natured people, who gladly lend every tool they do not

immediately need'.[lxviii] According to Reclus, Inuit customs included the communitarian sharing of every captured seal, and in general an Inuit 'is proud of giving all, saying that he is happier giving than receiving'.[lxix] In this sense, Inuit tribes were thought to be poor societies, yet poverty was unknown. 'The one who has shares with those who have nothing. The hungry man, without asking, sits down and eats from the common dish. Europeans, always ready to judge, clearly took this communist behaviour for theft'.[lxx] According to a sarcastic Reclus, the Inuit 'has no need of an authority before which he must tremble, he does not give a sword to justice or a hammer to authority. How then can he do without prisons and policemen, bailiffs and pleas? Poor savage, how he is to be pitied!'[lxxi]

Reclus's final pages on the Inuit amount to a vehement denunciation of the crimes and massacres carried out by the so-called civilisers. 'The civilisers arrived with cannons, grape-shot, and magnificent proclamations…. To pile up pelts and fill casks with oil, they became as cruel as the Conquistadors had been in amassing gold. The taxman quickly turned murderer'.[lxxii] The parallel with the Spanish Conquistadors corroborated Élisée Reclus's statement that all throughout the Americas, 'the massacre began everywhere with the arrival of the White man'.[lxxiii] Élie Reclus also denounced the missionaries' role and added sarcastic remarks about the Russian Empress Catherine, and her friendship with French Enlightenment thinkers.

> The Empress Catherine, extremely pious as we all know, decided in 1793 that missionaries should be sent out to these poor Aleuts, to instruct them in Christianity, and convicts to initiate them in agriculture. She sent out via the ship *The Three Saints* a boatload of convicts; the illustrious friend of philosophers and economists could think of no greater kindness towards the wretched natives. But who would have thought! Things indeed went from bad to worse … resistance to civilisation's laws became a crime. The Aleuts, who had been delivered up as subjects, were treated like slaves; without providing them with any remuneration whatsoever, or even feeding them, they were overburdened with compulsory labour.[lxxiv]

Thus, 'three generations of Christians and civilisers were enough to exhaust the country and bleed it to death'[lxxv] and, as a result, 'this way of working reached its logical conclusion, ruin. In the end, the business no longer turned a profit and in 1867 Aleutia was sold to the United States, with what remained of the Aleutians'.[lxxvi] Reclus questioned the common deterministic

explanations of the extinction of indigenous peoples, addressing the responsibilities of so-called superior cultures.

Consumption wreaked havoc among the Inuit. It alone has killed more individuals than all other diseases; and this terrible scourge, hitherto unknown, was brought by civilisation. Nearby, the Redskins are being decimated by smallpox, the sad gift of the Pale Faces. Why do the civilised have so fatal an effect upon the savage? There are those who can determine the physiological causes; let us inquire into some of the moral causes which led to this result.[lxxvii]

The final paragraph, which Reclus titled 'The murderous civilisation' (*La civilisation meurtrière*), stressed the general contradictions of the idea of civilisation.

Modern civilisation, irresistible when it disrupts and disorganises barbaric societies, displays a singular clumsiness in bettering their condition. It is due to a lack of goodness, a lack of humanity. Our genius shows itself neither amiable nor sympathetic. What! Encounter a people who are so gentle and patient, so inclined to justice and equality, yet only be able to subjugate and flog, decimate and destroy! This little group was gay, playful, brave; it asked nothing more than to work in order to live, but also wished to sing, dance, and feast. And no sooner was it acquainted with our progress than it became sad and morose… We crushed them—why and how? And when the last of these poor Aleuts has disappeared, people will be heard to say, 'What a pity!'[lxxviii]

3. Aboriginal Australians: towards the (alleged) limits of humankind

In her works on the European views of Aboriginal Australians, Kay Anderson has addressed critical race theory through the lens of cultural and historical geography, arguing that the encounter between indigenous and colonisers corresponded to a new stage in what she calls the 'violence of humanism',[lxxix] questioning the limits of humankind as they were then perceived. This implied a fixation on the idea of race; according to Anderson, one can see 'the hardening of ideas in the 19th century: from a relatively benign notion of race as 'tribe-nation-kin' to race as 'innate-immutable-biological''.[lxxx] The Aboriginal Australians contributed to this innatist intellectual turn, being considered then the lowest stage of civilisation, biologically incapable of redemption.

This characterisation, less of 'difference' or an abstracted 'otherness', and more precisely of extremity, even perversity, wasn't so much rolled into European knowledge systems or legitimation projects … but on the contrary

deranged them. Observations from colonial Australia were especially troubling to Scottish and French Enlightenment models of human development, according to which people were presumed to realize their very character 'as human' in a progressive movement out of, and control over, nature.[lxxxi]

According to Anderson, what was being questioned was precisely the idea of a possible generalised progress, implying a renegotiation of the limits between nature and culture. 'What was at stake was not only the (false) conceit of race, but the very idea of human distinction from the nonhuman world'.[lxxxii] I would argue that the works the anarchist geographers, and especially Élie Reclus, devoted to the Australian hunter-gatherers were radically far from what Anderson defines 'Enlightenment Christianity'[lxxxiii] (an oxymoron to the Recluses), since they defined a completely different way to conceive both humanism and Enlightenment, including an empathic idea of the proximity between human and nonhuman beings. Reclus's arguments also recall works like *Whitefella jump up* (2003) by Germaine Greer, who subverts mainstream assessments on the 'aboriginal problem' arguing that Aboriginality is not a problem but a solution and that the first society which has to emerge from its 'barbarity', in Australia, is the 'White' one. Greer proposes 'a U-turn after two hundred years of careering off in the wrong direction'[lxxxiv] which would mean declaring all the country as an aboriginal one, because 'Aboriginality can be denied and even forgotten [but] it cannot cease to exist'.[lxxxv]

In his second ethnographic monograph, *Le Primitif d'Australie* (1895), Élie Reclus set out to study 'the human communities that are said to be the most abject and backward'.[lxxxvi] Reclus's first argument for relativizing this statement is related to the 'Palaeolithic equation'. Studying Australians, he contends, 'I was pleasantly surprised. The savagery of the Antichtons sheds light on the barbarous societies of the Old World, and our ancestors lived once again in a despised bushman. Even better, this Primitive took on an aspect of Universal Man'.[lxxxvii] This makes clear Reclus's distance from the scientists questioning the human nature of Aboriginal Australians, who figure in Anderson's paper; Reclus argued ironically that such scholars 'thought they were being condescending by not tossing this man out of humankind'.[lxxxviii]

The proximity between humans and other animals, according to the anarchist geographers, was not a mark of inferiority or superiority of some populations, but merely an evolutionist matter:

according to Élisée Reclus, animals were 'humankind's great educators',[lxxxix] as the first human societies were thought to have learnt a lot from imitating animals in things like choosing their dwellings or elaborating hunting strategies. This idea was consistent with the profound influence that the German natural philosophy of Lorenz Oken and Friedrich Schelling, the *Naturphilosophie*, exercised on the anarchist geographers, who consequently saw 'nature' and humankind as elements that are inseparable and mutually necessary within the same environment.[xc] Élie Reclus viewed this (as one would say today) more-than-human mimesis as an element showing the different intelligence and cleverness of first peoples in their adaptation to respective environments. 'Like their brother the Bushman, like the Bhils, Apaches and Massaouas, like the many animals that practice mimicry to avoid being seen, some by their prey, others by the hunter, they are skilled at blending in with the landscape'.[xci] The relativity of human intelligence is underscored by hyperbolic expressions, contradicting some ethnographers who had asserted a lack of intelligence on the part of some Aboriginal Australians who did not completely cook their meals because they were allegedly unable to maintain the fire for a long enough time. 'I would like to see these ethnographers renew Prometheus's miracle on a wet day'.[xcii]

In *Le Primitif d'Australie*, Reclus applied the same methods as in *Les Primitifs*, answering the 'civilised' about the alleged vices of the 'savages' by comparing the Aboriginals' anthropophagy described by Western explorers with the cruelty of European wars: 'As if it were less cruel to slaughter a living man than to cook a corpse!'[xciii] As with the Inuit, Reclus addressed the Australians, maintaining that 'these Blacks never lie, and have no police. They keep their word but have no policemen. They have a sacred respect for others' stores of food'.[xciv] Again, this did not correspond to an idealised view like Rousseau's 'noble savage', as Reclus made no effort to hide particulars likely to disgust his European reader, e.g. pointing out that these food deposits could be 'rotten trunks swarming with tasty larvae'.[xcv] Once again the idea of primitive communism is praised with regard to Aboriginal Australians. 'Immersed in brotherhood, this Primitive would understand nothing of the practices of repulsive egotism and pitiless exploitation that our industrialists and merchants disguise under the name of Individualism and the Freedom to Work. If you tell an honest cannibal from Queensland that workers are starving to death amid the fabulous wealth of Paris and London, he would think that you were making fun of him.'[xcvi]

In the chapter titled 'How Civilisation Civilises', Reclus compares different stories of conquests and massacres by Europeans, including Frenchmen. 'The French did all in their power to show the Madagascans their true nature'.[xcvii] In the case of the Australians, Reclus went over the disastrous social consequences of the English government's decision to send all sorts of common criminals there. The melting pot of Aboriginal Australians and these exponents of European civilisation, who would join some local tribe once they had escaped the penal colonies, is described sarcastically by the author. 'The ancient murderer was taken for a captain, became a military leader … and showed himself more savage than the savages… These messiahs were the very best Great Britain had in terms of thieves, bankrupt wretches, killers and other brigands… Such was civilisation's first contact with the children of Nature'.[xcviii] Reclus goes on to decry the fact that when the British legalised real property in Australia, the natives were not considered persons with legal rights. 'In 1834, the British parliament approved an act establishing the system of legal ownership of property on Australian soil, without even mentioning the Australian native. Colonisation was carried out on the principle that the land to be peopled was *res nullius*'.[xcix]

Reclus also analysed the environmental and more-than-human aspects of colonisation, which was also a struggle for the supremacy of the coloniser's livestock over local fauna. Colonists regarded kangaroos as being too numerous and too close to their own animals: '…grazing near civilized livestock, [they] diminish the grass. Soon the legislator passed laws in favour of the sheep, which has to be protected against the carnivorous dingo, but mainly against its rival, the herbivorous kangaroo'.[c] Describing white Australians' dreadful massacres of kangaroos and other marsupials, Reclus points out that 'killing the kangaroo, they were killing the indigenous people, [being aware that] the kangaroo was more necessary to the Negro than the sheep to the European'.[ci] It is also worth noting that the Reclus brothers were vegetarians and close to what is called today animal rights;[cii] the story of these ecological disasters sounds like a denunciation of crimes against both humans and nonhumans. The Reclus's ecological complaints are rounded out by a description of the colonisers' method of converting woods into pastures burning the woods of secular eucalyptus.[ciii]

The new European system of property and the alleged universal law of capital thus helped to complete the massacres of humans.

> If it happened that, starving and angered by the spectacle of fat animals, the native broke into the enclosure and took one for himself, this was called 'robbery', an act that is vigorously punished by the Whites' law, which is inflexible in its distinctions: 'The kangaroo, as game, is common property; the sheep, as livestock, is private property'. Begin with a good definition of the terms, establish that money, the rich man's capital, bears interest, and that work, the poor man's capital, bears none, the rest goes without saying.[civ]

According to Briony McDonagh and Carl J. Griffin, the concept of land enclosure as the withdrawal of former common rights is a modern one, starting in England between the 16th and the 17th century.[cv] This phenomenon is linked to histories of resistance, including the experience of the Diggers led by Gerrard Winstanley, whom authors like Jim Mac Laughlin consider as one of the forerunners of anarchism.[cvi] Reclus's arguments against Australian enclosures recall what David Featherstone defines as the complex field of 'subaltern political ecologies', or 'subaltern interventions which have contested the unequal production of relations between heterogeneous associations of humans and non-humans'.[cvii] The example addressed by Featherstone, i.e. the eighteenth-century Irish movement of the Whiteboys, presents some similarities with the cases of indigenous agency addressed by Reclus, like subtraction of livestock belonging to dominators as a reaction to unjust 'relations between humans and non-humans'.[cviii] This confirms Reclus's awareness of the complex interactions of human and non-human agency, with the specificity of his compassion for all the (human and non-human) victims of these conflicts.

Reclus also dedicates some pages to comparisons with cases of indigenous populations' extermination on other continents by other European nations, to make clear that his polemical target was not specifically the British Crown, but all European civilisation. Thus, he focused on the colonial crimes committed in Southwest Africa by the Boers, who were rivals of the British at the time. 'Their valiant troops made the recalcitrant see reason, slaughtered men, rounded up the cattle, planted new posts and returned covered with glory for having enlarged the limits of the Christian country. For these Protestants are very pious… they say their prayers every evening and read the Bible with their families'.[cix] Élie and Élisée Reclus were the sons of a Protestant minister

from Southwest France, and their anticlerical arguments touching on religion's complicity in colonial crimes were always sharp and directed at a broad range of faiths Catholics, Protestants and others. The brothers' ideas, moreover, have something to add to present debates on the place of religions in postcolonial critique, which Sidaway, Woon and Jacobs view as an open problem, contending that a postcolonial perspective 'not only brings into view the omnipresent empires that fill the Torah and Bible, but also the legitimising realities of many ongoing Christian practices. We might think here of the colonial framing of Christian evangelising'.[cx]

Redirecting his conclusions to the situation in Australia, Reclus castigated the colonisers' explicit demands to view Aboriginal Australians as wild beasts, granting everybody the right to kill, rob, or enslave them.

> Killing them is no crime. 'These cannibals, [the colonists say], have to be exterminated for the commonweal. They eat putrefied dogs, they lap water from ditches, dishonour mankind by their beasty ways...' 'Shoot them down without regret', wrote one newspaper in Port Jackson… The papers in Sydney explained, 'Wild beasts or Aborigines,[cxi] it is all the same. Are they harmless? Let them waste away. Are they ferocious? Well then, eliminate them'.[cxii]

Finally, Reclus stressed again the link between exploitation and colonial crimes, asserting that only by getting rid of capitalism could one put a decisive end to all that.

> Black-skin and Red-skin are expelled from the land that witnessed their birth and sent to die in the desert. In their heritage, industry adventurers cut out kingdoms for themselves. But today's crime brings tomorrow's vengeance. For Real Property has always demoralised, disorganised and finally destroyed the nations that have suffered it. This is the fate awaiting us, unless the peoples … suppress real property, an inheritance of feudal barbarity, and rid themselves of Capitalism.[cxiii]

As shown by recent research, the prediction of a future decolonisation and the call for a revolt among colonised peoples were one of the original points made by the anarchist geographers with respect to other European critics during the Age of Imperialism.[cxiv] Nevertheless, Élie Reclus's prediction about the disappearance of hunter-gatherers was rather pessimistic, considering the colonisers' lack of pity and the murderous nature of civilisation. 'Stanley, the famous vanguard

civiliser, had a brilliant saying, "Our souls are in our rifles". Indeed, the rifle is the symbol per excellence of modern civilisation'.[cxv]

The problems of a possible melting pot were analysed, consideration being given first to the horror that the 'pure white' race's supporters felt at the idea of miscegenation. 'The Britisher [*le Britisheur*] will not degrade his blood, inoculating it in some inferior creature. This Puritan, this haughty man, perhorresces at miscegenation; his humanity begins and ends with the Anglo-Saxon'.[cxvi] The other problem was the impossibility non-white people faced of obtaining for themselves a not completely subaltern position in the colonisers' society; Reclus mentioned the story of a young Aboriginal Australian who had the chance to do distinguished studies in Sydney. 'His studies ended, it was impossible to find for him a position other than cook or manservant… He replied, "I am going back to the bush, and I regret ever having left! With all that they taught me, I remain in my skin, and the Whites will never forgive me for being Black"'.[cxvii]

Reclus did not always have access to first-hand sources because he never did fieldwork in Australia or the Arctic. He was a particular instance of the 'armchair (geo)ethnographer', with all the limits this entailed. Nevertheless, he made every attempt to let the subaltern speak, and quoted this eyewitness account by an old Aboriginal chief.

'My people were as old as the mountains… To destroy us, all it took were some Whites arriving with their sheep … If only they had merely killed us! But they have robbed us of our freedom, stripped us of our honour. In times past we knew nothing of stealing, lying, cozening our brother, betraying our friend. Die then, O Man of the Forest, be done with human misery! There is neither truth nor justice, at least for the Negro.'[cxviii]

Finally, humans and nonhumans are mentioned as the victims of the same murderous civilisers, and the responsibilities of scientists are underscored. 'The seal and the beaver are disappearing, the Redskin, the Bushman, the Australian are disappearing, too. Christians, Industrialists, and Capitalists together massacre all those that cannot defend themselves. "That is civilisation's right", cry the theorists of the struggle for existence. "It is even our duty to ignore pity!" "No scruples!" add the professors of Political Economy.[cxix] And certain anthropologists chime in, "Never too soon!"'[cxx] The indeterminate designation 'certain anthropologists' suggests that

European science was not a colonialist and racist monolith, but that tensions and controversies raged in this complex field, where anarchist geographers were clearly the most radical supporters of a consistent common universality of human rights accompanied by a defence of cultural differences.

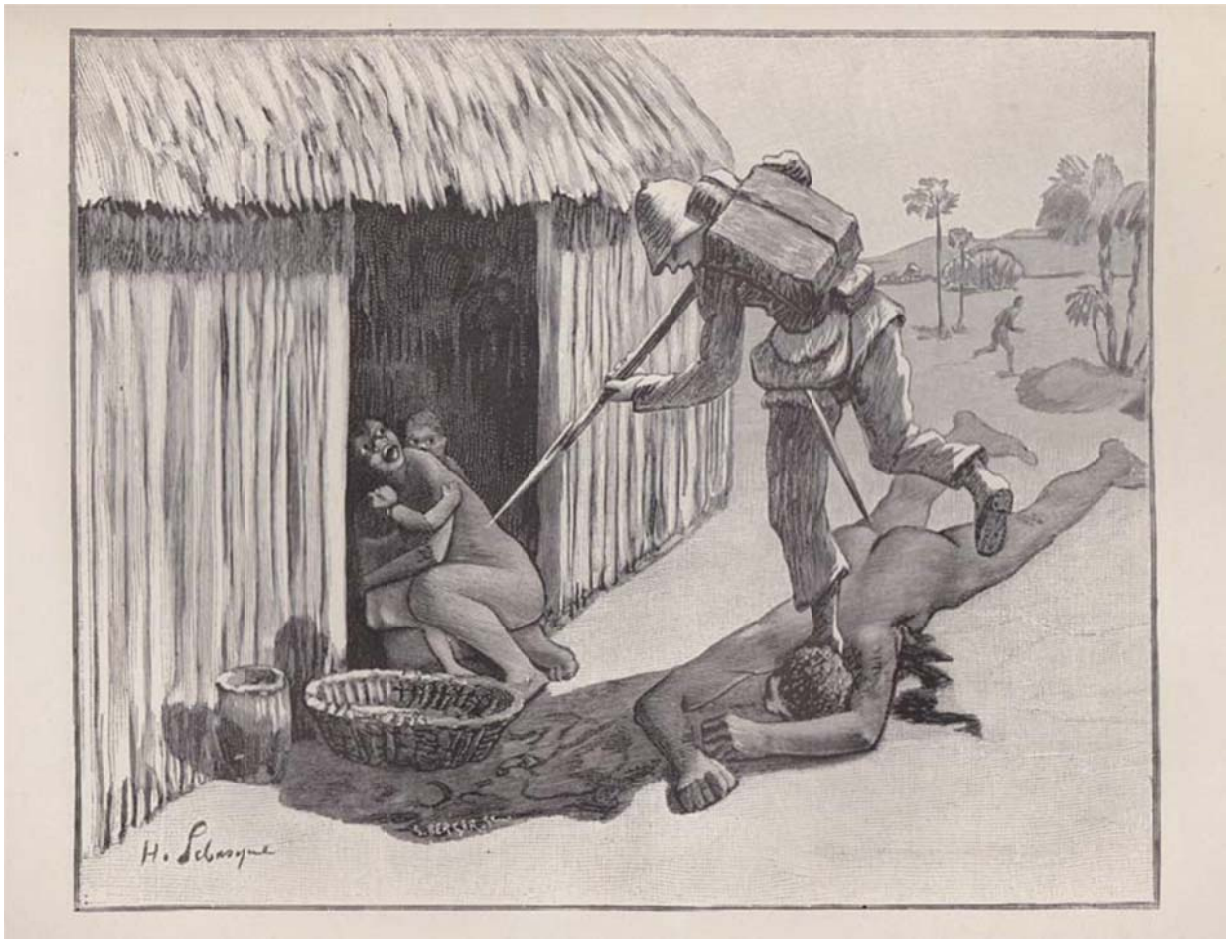

Fig. 1 – Drawing by Henri Lebasque, in J.Grave (ed.), *Patriotisme et colonisation* (Paris: Éditions des Temps Nouveaux, 1903)

Ethnographic works by Élie Reclus also reached a readership beyond the scientific world. For instance, several chapters of *Les Primitifs* and *Le Primitif d'Australie* were reprinted in 1903 in the collective work *Patriotisme et Colonisation*, edited by the famous French anarchist Jean Grave (1854-1939) and with a preface by Élisée Reclus. This volume is considered one of the milestones of early anti-colonialism in the French Left (Fig. 1 and 2).[cxxi] Thus, one could argue

that these works were circulated and influenced the growing awareness, in European militant milieus, of colonial crimes and the need to consider the standpoint of the Other.

Fig. 2 – Drawing by Maximilien Luce, in Grave, *Patriotisme et colonisation*

Reclus's numerous references to the 'brotherhood' between native peoples associated by similar experiences of massacre and oppression find echoes in a recent literature addressing subaltern networks characterised by what Robbie Shilliam calls 'a sensibility of global injustice over colonial rule'.[cxxii] According to Shilliam, connections between subaltern cultures could be made beyond colonizers' networks, an example being the spread, in New Zealand, of cultures inspired by Black revolts in North America, which were everywhere 'feared as the arrive of Black anarchy'.[cxxiii] If Tony Ballantyne shows the importance of newspaper circulation and print culture for the formation of early anti-colonial networks in the British Empire,[cxxiv] what is worth noting in the case of the anarchist geographers' networks is their transitional and multilingual nature not dependent by the expansion of one Empire (e.g. the British one) or one language. Another of the Reclus brothers' originalities was their critique of European humanitarian associations, which failed to grant indigenous peoples the most fundamental right, that of 'getting rid of us',[cxxv] a statement which is now echoed by Zoë Laidlaw, who argues that groups like the *Aborigines' Protection Society* 'adopted a paradoxical stance, at once critical of colonialism's consequences, yet blind to its inherent and systematic deficiencies'.[cxxvi] Alan Lester recently analysed the case of the Port Phillip *Protectorate of Aborigines*, which shows that histories of indigenous agency were constantly hampered by the laws and interests of the 'Whitefellas', as Élie Reclus had pointed out. According to Lester, 'if we are looking for the enduring legacy of the protectorate as humanitarian space … the violence of colonisation was so structural and so overwhelming that we need to scale down to the fine grain of genealogy to find it'.[cxxvii]

Conclusion: legacy and later debates

One immediate legacy of Reclus's ideas is seen in the works of Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, who explicitly adhered to anarchism in his college years, when he was nicknamed 'Anarchy Brown'. Stocking quotes Radcliffe-Brown recalling his intellectual foundations: 'I read Godwin, Proudhon, Marx … Kropotkin, revolutionary, but still a scientist, pointed out how important for any attempt to improve society was a scientific understanding of it, and the importance in this respect of what our friend Élie Reclus called *Primitive Folk*'.[cxxviii] It is generally thought that the anarchist geographers' influence upon later scholars is due mainly to Kropotkin. According to

Richard Perry, 'Malinowski had also taken note of the ideas of Kropotkin', which suggests 'the extent of Kropotkin's effect on anthropology'.[cxxix] More research is needed on the Reclus brothers' legacy, and more generally on the impact anarchist geographers and ethnographers had in the Anglophone world.

I have shown here that even a little-known figure like Élie Reclus made an important contribution to forging a scientific argument meant to build empathy and real equality among all the world's peoples through mutual understanding and respect. If some expressions of that time, like 'Bushmen', are certainly outdated, the radicalism of the approach stands apart both with respect to the Recluses' strong condemnation of all colonial crimes and in their call for a more general struggle against capitalism. This represented not so much an alternative to Enlightenment and Humanism, as an effort to define effective and consistent applications of the ideas of universal brotherhood. In that regard then geography was indeed relevant, since Élie Reclus's ethnographic work fed into the geographical ideas, including mutual aid, that Kropotkin and Élie's brother Élisée were putting forward.

In terms of ethnography, even though Reclus was a far cry from what is now called 'primitivism' and never spoke of a return to 'life in the state of nature', he would nonetheless share James Scott's present-day statements about Zomia, 'Not so very long ago, such self-governing peoples were the great majority of humankind'.[cxxx] In terms of cultural geography, postcolonialism and Otherness, I would argue that the Reclus brothers' ideas and writings anticipated some features of the later works against Eurocentrism developed by geographers in the last decades, notably the thought that to make sense of human difference it was first necessary to understand the Other's standpoint, relativizing and questioning the alleged objective scientific gaze of imperial geographies. This early body of work still provides useful ideas for social and cultural geographies that challenge present-day racism, cultural essentialism and Eurocentrism. Élisée Reclus's statement (which owes a great deal to Élie's ethnography) that considers anarchism the 'complete union of the civilised with the savage and nature'[cxxxi] recalls in this sense Sidaway, Woon and Jacobs's recent demand for a 'planetary indigeneity'.[cxxxii] The case of early anarchist

geographers can contribute to this agenda by providing examples of transnational, transcultural and multilingual networks 'thinking about the geographies of solidarities'.[cxxxiii]

Finally, Emmanuel Nelson argued that prejudices considering Aboriginal Australians as people out of history are hard to die. 'These observations cannot be dismissed or excused merely as products of intellectually and culturally limited nineteenth-century European minds, for these beliefs still enjoy considerable respectability in modern Australia'.[cxxxiv] Thus, Élie Reclus's ethnography is a further example showing that is too easy to dismiss all European philosophy of the 18th and 19th centuries without considering that conflicts between racists and anti-racists, cosmopolitans and chauvinists, libertarians and authoritarians, existed then and still exist today.

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